

On a cattle ranch protected by a Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program easement held by Eastern Sierra Land Trust, volunteers install perch deterrents on fence posts to reduce predation by ravens on sage-grouse.

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# *Saving Farm Bill* **CONSERVATION PROGRAMS**

BY Sarina Katz, Christina Soto and Bryan David

**S**INCE THE YEARS OF THE DUST BOWL, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has been supporting private land and wetland conservation through the collection of federal laws collectively known as the Farm Bill. Administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the bill's conservation funding has ebbed and flowed with the political tides. Now, with an administration proposing major budget cuts at USDA, the land trust community must turn its attention back to the Farm Bill if it hopes to sustain the funding it won in earlier bills.

In past years the Land Trust Alliance has worked tirelessly to make the Farm Bill an important source of conservation funding for land trusts. In 2014 we celebrated securing nearly \$750 million for conservation easement purchases. This was made possible by countless phone calls, meetings and letters directed to congressional members of both parties from many land trusts. After passage, our attention quickly shifted to rulemaking. We worked closely with NRCS to try to make the new conservation easement programs work well for land trusts.

The current bill is set to expire in September 2018, but the time to start lobbying on behalf of the Farm Bill is now. Our priorities are twofold: protect conservation funding now slated to be slashed in 2018 and make the Farm Bill's easement programs more accessible and easier to use for land trusts and landowners.

## **Coalition Urges Strong Funding**

The Alliance is working closely with its partners to develop shared priorities on programs that protect working farms, ranches and forests, and to encourage new and innovative partnerships to target natural resource concerns at the landscape level. As with any major piece of legislation, we are stronger when we work with other partners.

Investments in conservation programs, specifically for working lands, have long enjoyed bipartisan appeal and support from organizations like the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, as well as conservation groups.

In March 2017, the Alliance helped deliver a letter from a coalition of agriculture, wildlife, sportsmen's and environmental groups to the leaders of the House and Senate Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittees, stating:

Full funding for conservation programs, such as the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) and Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), is critical to enable farmers, ranchers and foresters across the country to conserve water, maintain their soil, protect farmland and wetlands, create and maintain fish and wildlife habitat, and produce abundant food and fiber. The funding already authorized for these programs should be protected as a vital investment in the infrastructure of rural America and in our future.

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Strengthening partnerships with other organizations, along with advocacy from land trusts, will help these conservation programs continue to provide benefits to farmers, ranchers and foresters—and the public.

## **The Role of Land Trusts**

Many land trusts around the country include protecting farm and ranch land in their missions. Federal funding from the Farm Bill has enabled this work, producing example after example of farmers and ranchers who were able to conserve their land through the Farm Bill conservation programs.

In addition to protecting farmland itself, land trusts have important roles to play in helping to ensure that working lands stay in working hands, protecting habitat on farm and ranch land and enhancing environmental resource values, such as water quality and soil health.

Next-generation farmers are often unable to get a start because of the expense of buying a farm. However, land trusts can help by using easements and other tools (such as the “option to purchase at agricultural value”) to reduce this capital expense. (See the *Saving Land* article “Partnering with Next-Generation Farmers,” Summer 2015.)

And farms and ranches also provide critical habitat for species, such as the sage-grouse, which has helped keep it off the endangered species list so that farmers and ranchers avoid the need for costly and burdensome regulation.

Here are two examples of how land trusts are working with farmers to protect their farms—and the environment. What is the link to the Farm Bill? It funds these innovative programs.

## **Leelanau Conservancy**

Farmland is a major driver for the economy in Michigan’s Leelanau County, which is primarily based on tourism and farm production. The average age of farmers there is 60, and many are contemplating

retirement. Between 1990 and 2000 more than 20% of Leelanau County’s farmland was converted to nonagricultural uses (primarily second home development).<sup>1</sup> Today, 33,000 acres remain in active production. High demand for development on this same land and limited funding (public and private) for farmland preservation are a continuous threat to the county’s agricultural land resources.

The accredited Leelanau Conservancy has been the consistent voice for farmland preservation in the county over the past decade. It has worked with Michigan State University and the Leelanau Conservation District to develop an innovative “bridge” program for permanent farmland protection. Designed as an outreach strategy to build support and open doors in the farming community, the FarmAbility program currently has over 5,000 acres in 10-year Farm Conservation Agreements.

In an effort to expand its farmland conservation work in the time since FarmAbility’s launch, Leelanau Conservancy has worked collaboratively to secure an RCPP award and initiate a new suite of programs to address generational land transfer.

The conservancy secured \$7.9 million to protect farmland and water quality in Michigan’s fruit belt region as part of the Tribal Stream and Michigan Fruit Belt Partnership through RCPP, a new Farm Bill program designed to focus on landscape-level projects. The Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians served as the lead partner, while the accredited Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy and Conservation Resource Alliance, along with a number of affiliated regional conservation partners, worked with Leelanau Conservancy to obtain this funding.

RCPP funds will be used to support the purchase of conservation easements on Leelanau County’s globally rare farmland that is uniquely suited for fruit production. The conservancy’s farm programs manager, Sam Plotkin, says, “Without access to public funds for farmland conservation at the local or state levels, we rely heavily on federal support from ACEP. For that reason, RCPP is vital.”

To address generational transfer, Leelanau Conservancy has initiated FarmAbility 2.0, featuring two programs: Farmer to Farmer (F2F) and Farm Transitions. F2F is Michigan’s first farmlink program and was launched in partnership with Northwest Michigan Horticulture Research Center, Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy and Taste the Local Difference. “As our region expects to see more than 80,000 acres of farmland change hands in coming years, we’re deeply concerned about getting the next generation of farmers—beginning farmers—on the land,” says Plotkin. One of the greatest barriers to starting farm businesses for beginning farmers is the challenge of finding available farmland for sale or lease. F2F seeks to address this barrier by creating an online, peer-to-peer farm real estate network ([www.f2fmi.com](http://www.f2fmi.com)).

Additionally, working with Michigan State University Extension, Farm Transitions aims to encourage working farmers to plan for the succession of their farm to the next generation. With technical assistance from the extension and area succession-planning professionals,



Leelanau Conservancy has been a consistent voice for farmland protection in Michigan’s fruit belt. LEELANAU CONSERVANCY

## *Land trusts have an extremely important role to play in advocating for farm bill programs.*

Leelanau Conservancy will cost share the expenses associated with planning for the transition of farmland to the next generation.

### **Eastern Sierra Land Trust**

“If you’ve ever seen and heard a greater sage-grouse booming, it’s something you’ll never forget,” says Susanna Danner, land conservation program director of the accredited Eastern Sierra Land Trust (ESLT) in California. “First, because you probably got up at 3 a.m. to go out to their strutting grounds to wait in the predawn darkness for them to arrive. Second, because with their yellow eyebrows, shock of ruff plumage and spiny-looking tail, they are statuesque. Their courting behavior, as they fill and deflate air sacs in their chest, makes a noise comparable to a coffee percolator. Perfectly suited to the wide-open rangelands of the West, the sound can carry for almost 2 miles.”

With so much public land in the bi-state (Nevada and California), how are private livestock producers so central to sage-grouse conservation? As with much of the West, dryland range is largely publicly owned, while riparian, wetlands and wet meadows are mostly private. The majority of the brood-rearing habitat needed by sage-grouse chicks is privately owned. While sage-grouse adults are famous for being the only creatures that can subsist wholly on sagebrush leaves during the winter, the baby birds need the insects, forbs and grasses in wet meadows and irrigated pastures on private lands in the spring and summer.

ESLT recently received funding from the RCPP to protect and enhance sage-grouse habitat. Danner says, “The project is called ‘Livestock in Harmony with Bi-State Sage-Grouse. The sage-grouse and livestock thrive together in the ranchlands of the Nevada-California border.” She says the possibility of listing the sage-grouse as federally threatened crystallized a partnership that had already been collaborating on grouse conservation projects for more than 15 years. “The governors and wildlife agencies of Nevada and California lent their support to a cross-border effort of striking proportions. The conservation success for the bi-state greater sage-grouse is directly attributable to a partnership of which this RCPP project is a result.”

“The RCPP broadens ESLT’s traditional approach to ranch conservation by incorporating education, outreach and technical assistance to landowners,” says Danner. Conservation easements are an element of the RCPP with which ESLT is very familiar, “but we’ve never helped a landowner navigate the EQIP before, and we’ll be doing a lot of that in the next five years.” She lauds the land trust’s



Volunteers mark a pasture fence to reduce sage-grouse fence-strikes in the RCPP project area on a preserve owned by Eastern Sierra Land Trust. The simple fence tags reduce sage-grouse mortality by 80%. SUSANNA DANNER


NRCS partners, who are “serving landowners across 7,000 square miles, even when faced with reduced staff capacity. The land trust and other RCPP partners can be a sort of ‘Hamburger Helper’ to stretch NRCS’ ability to serve landowners who don’t live close to an NRCS service center,” says Danner.

Ranchers in the bi-state have a history of close coordination with NRCS and a deep commitment to conservation. More than 15,000 acres of private lands have been placed under conservation easement in the bi-state, with support from NRCS, ESLT, The Nature Conservancy (accredited), California Rangeland Trust (accredited), the states of Nevada and California, California Deer Association and others.

Danner describes the RCPP as a relatively new program, “meaning that the learning curve is steep for both applicants and NRCS staff. There aren’t many forums yet for land trusts to troubleshoot, discuss and ask questions about the application process. There were many questions that arose in the course of the application that I wish I could have put to a land trust audience. I cold-called many past RCPP applicants around the country, and they helped me a great deal, as did the Land Trust Alliance.”

To try to help other land trust applicants, Danner created a group on The Learning Center, where topics about Farm Bill programs, including RCPP, can be shared and discussed. “I’m hopeful the site will become a clearinghouse for sample applications, easement documents, questions and answers, and will help land trusts navigate Farm Bill programs with greater ease.”

### **Advocating for the Farm Bill**

The Land Trust Alliance has identified the Farm Bill as one of its top policy priorities, and land trusts, especially those whose primary focus is agricultural land preservation, have an extremely important role to play in advocating for farm bill programs. Members of Congress need input from local organizations about how programs are and are not working. A tour of a farm or ranch conserved with an easement can help make the technical real and enhance their understanding of the bill they are writing. Hearing from landowners and land trusts can increase the chances of strengthening funding for programs, making them more workable and successfully conserving working lands and their natural resource values. 

<sup>1</sup> Statistics from “Protecting Michigan’s Agricultural Future,” Heart of the Lakes Center for Land Conservation Policy, 2009.